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ABSTRACT

Although the short story is brief and seemingly simple to comprehend, experienced teachers know from painful experience that students often read without "seeing" and that the only way to get them to "see" is to isolate some of the elements of the short story and present them in a different way to focus attention on them. For example, to demonstrate the importance of sequence in plot, students can be asked to list some personal events on six file cards. The cards are then exchanged and students are asked to arrange the events in what seems to be a logical order. To assist students in making a distinction between plot and theme, students can be asked to develop a collection of pictures that seem to suggest stories. Divided into groups, students can select pictures that illustrate different stories with similar themes. Once students seem to have grasped plot structure, the teacher can assess their ability to recognize effective plots by asking them to supply the ending for selected situations. Constant practice in examining settings and inferring clues from the story will also help students perceive the significance of these elements and train them to keep track of details as a story proceeds. Characterization can be studied by demonstrating the limitations of stereotyping and making students aware of the need for collecting as much evidence as possible before forming any judgments or generalizations. A final assessment of student growth can be accomplished through creative problem-solving "tests" using such approaches as improvisation, visual aids, and writing. (HOD)

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Involving Students with the Short Story

The short story faces strong competition these days from television, which, in the span of thirty minutes, can deal quite effectively with the equivalent of the short story; in fact, most situational comedies and dramatic programs on television use the basic ingredients of the short story format rather than the more leisurely development of the novel.

In spite of the competition, or perhaps because of it, short stories retain a high popularity with both teachers and students. For teachers, the form provides a tightly structured format that offers more than adequate material for teaching basic literary concepts and for holding student interest during a class period. Because of the relative shortness of the genre, a number of different stories can be introduced in a relatively short time, providing teachers and students with ample material for a variety of approaches. The teacher also finds it easy to match short stories with other forms of literature in various units of study, thus assuring that reinforcement of the characteristics of short stories occurs over a period of time.

Students like short stories because they contain many of the recognizable elements of television, movies and novels. Faced with reading a short story for a literature class, the student usually does not perceive the assignment as overwhelming. With some stories running only three or four pages, finishing a reading assignment ceases to become a major undertaking, and even the slow reader derives satisfaction from actually completing something that has been started.

Yet, because the short story is brief and hence seemingly simple to comprehend, we often assume that students will grasp the basic elements of it without difficulty. Nothing could be further from the truth. Experienced teachers know from painful experience that students often read without "seeing,"

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and that the only way to get them to "see" is to isolate some of the elements and present them in a different way to focus attention on them. The creative teacher will discover numerous ways to achieve this but here are a few suggestions.

Plot Construction

Readers tend to use the term "story" whether they are referring to a short story, a novel, or something that happened to them last night. Traditionally, of course, in literature the term suggests a series of interrelated events, otherwise known as "plot." Careful readers understand that the development of plot is involved inextricably with the selection of details; authors take great care selecting items which may be used to form the basis of action in the story. Just having a series of carefully related events, though, does not automatically produce a plot, a fact many young readers find difficult to understand. For example, if one recites the events of getting up in the morning, putting on one's clothes, preparing breakfast, eating it, going to work, coming home, eating, and then going to bed, a series of related events exists; but this is not an adequate plot for a short story until the writer directs these events toward answering a question or solving a problem: The resulting tension or conflict "makes" the story go. Because students frequently overlook the significance of this conflict and how it contributes to holding the reader's attention, they need to discover this in a variety of ways. Here are several activities for that purpose.

Sequence. To demonstrate the importance of sequence in plot and the necessity of conflict in a story, ask students to do the following. Give each student six 3" x 5" file cards; on each card the student is to list some event that has happened to him or her. When the cards are completed, students are to exchange them with someone. Then students pair off and, using the cards he or she received, each student arranges the events in what seems to be a logical order; with that order in mind, the student tries to construct a convincing story, which is told orally

to the other person. Then the partner does the same thing with his or her cards. The exercise also can be done with prepared cards that have on them the events from a story that students are about to read. Working in groups, they can construct what they believe to be a logical sequence. Then they can read the story and compare their sequence with the actual order of events in the story. From this exercise, students learn that establishing an order of events is not always easy and building a plausible connection among incidents can become difficult.

Plot/Theme. Not infrequently, students also confuse plot and theme, using the terms interchangeably, failing to recognize that theme indicates what the work is about and plot is what happens. Students also need to recognize that writers use themes over and over, varying the plots to create interest and a fresh perspective. To assist students in making a distinction between the two, develop a collection of pictures that seem to suggest "stories." (Many teachers find it helpful to mount such pictures on cardboard to extend their life in the classroom).

Divide the class into groups of three to five, with each group receiving a work sheet and a collection of pictures. Each group is to complete the worksheet by selecting pictures that could illustrate different stories with similar themes. The students are to write one sentence summaries for each plot and indicate the number of the picture they used as a basis for the plot. The worksheet would look like this:[1]

Theme: Success rebuilds confidence.

Plot 1: A young Danish gymnast, critically burned in an automobile accident, overcomes disability, and through a series of competitive events achieves personal satisfication as well as medals of victory.
(picture no. 2)

Plot 2: _____

_____

After students complete the activity, they can display their choices or pictures and share some of their plot summaries. Students might then refer to their previous attempts of putting together six events and discuss why those events did or did not constitute a plot and what, if any, theme might have emerged. (When students become skilled at this kind of activity, they can produce both themes and plots).

Plot Sensitivity. Once students seem to have grasped plot structure, assess their ability to recognize effective plots by asking them to supply the ending for selected situations. Several sources for such completion exercises exist or teachers can develop their own. Such an exercise also can be used prior to the reading of a story to increase student interest and involvement. Here is one sample of such plot completion activity.[2]

> Donald was a bright, intelligent boy with high ideals of honor. His scholastic rating was very important to him. One day in a ten weeks' examination in English he came to a question that called for detailed information about the Atlantic Monthly, including the name of the editor. Though he did not remember the name, he had a copy of the magazine in his desk. Since the boy in front of him was tall, Donald was able to open his desk and look at the magazine without being observed by the teacher. He did so. The next day, ashamed of having cheated, he told the teacher, whom he knew to be a fair-minded person. What do you think happened?
>
> Read the endings listed below, keeping in mind the facts of the case, the personality of the boy, and that of his teacher. Then number the endings in the order of their probability.
>
> a. The teacher told the class what had happened and gave Donald a zero on his examination. Since that test was counted as one third of his ten weeks' average, he received a failing grade on his report card. "Let this be a lesson to all of you," said the teacher.
>
> b. The teacher said, "Thank you for telling me. I reward you for your honesty. I will give you full credit for all the answers on your paper, including the one that you copied." Donald received the highest grade in the class.

c. The teacher told no one else, but gave Donald another set of questions to answer. He made a high schore.

d. Donald did not copy the the answer from the magazine. He left a blank space on his paper.

e. The teacher allowed Donald to take another examination. The questions were more difficult for him than those on the original test. Though he did well, his grade was somewhat lower than his score on the first test.

Discussion of activities like this will do much to heighten students' awareness of plots and how they may differ in quality and probability. Students may be encouraged to develop their own plot completion exercises based on outside reading and then test their classmates, for the more students are directly engaged in making choices during the reading activity, the more likely they are to become active readers.

Setting

Probably no other element in fiction gets treated as lightly as the setting. At times, of course, the blending of setting into the overall structure and effect of the story may be quite insignificant; at other times, the skillful weaving of setting and action will be such that unless there is a clear understanding of them, the reader may complete the story in a confused state.

Constant practice in examining settings and inferring clues from the story will help students perceive their significance and train them to keep track of details as a story proceeds. A passage from a story like D. H. Lawrence's "Tickets Please"[3] provides a useful sample for this kind of practice.

> There is in the Midlands a single-line tramway system which boldly leaves the county town and plunges off into the black, industrial country-side, up hill and down dale, through the long ugly villages of workmen's houses, over canals and railways, past churches perched high and nobly over the smoke and shadows, through stark, grimy cold little market-places, tilting away in a rush past cinemas and shops down to the hollow where the collieries are, then up again, past a little rural church, under the ash trees, on in a rush to the terminus, the last little ugly place of industry, the cold little town that shivers on the edge of the wild, gloomy country beyond. There the

> green and creamy coloured tramcar seems to pause and purr with curious satisfaction. But in a few minutes--the clock on the turret of the Co-operative Wholesale Society's shops gives the time--away it starts once more on the adventure. Again there are the reckless swoops downhill, bouncing the loops; again the chilly wait in the hill-top market-place; again the breathless slithering round the precipitous drop under the church; again the patient halts at the loops, waiting for the outcoming car; so on and on, for two long hours, till at last the city looms beyond the fat gasworks, the narrow factories draw near, we are in the sordid streets of the great town, once more we sidle to a standstill at our terminus, abashed by the great crimson and cream-coloured city cars, but still perky, jaunty, somewhat dare-devil, green as a jaunty sprig of parsley out of a black colliery garden.

Once students have finished reading the passage, engage them in the following activities:

A. Ask students what one image or picture stays in their minds after they finish reading. Build an "image skim" on the board with their responses; that is, simply list as many different impressions as you can obtain from students without their looking back at the text.

B. Then divide the class into groups of 3-5 students each, depending upon the size of the class, and divide the following tasks among the groups.

   1. Make a list of all the adverbs the author uses in the passage; then, based on your list, try to decide what the author is showing us by his use of these words.

   2. Make a list of all the adjectives the author uses; what sort of feelings or moods is he suggesting? What connection do the moods have with each other?

   3. List all the things (people, objects, machines, etc.) that the writer places in the passage; how are these things alike? How are they different? What other things might the writer have included in this passage? Why do you suppose he didn't?

When students have completed their survey of the passage and had ample opportunity to frame their answers, have each group report its findings to the class. Record their observations on the board; then ask students to relate their original impressions of the passage to the details and generalizations they have made as

a result of closer study. From such discussion should emerge a greater awareness of just how significant words can be in establishing a setting and how often a superficial reading results in a blurred picture of where a story is set and what the author is attempting to suggest through the setting.

This principle of word selection can be extended even further by using a modified cloze procedure, a method derived from reading instruction and designed to focus students' attention on certain types of words or certain types of reading skills. The basic cloze procedure deletes key words as a means for testing students' comprehension of those words. Using the cloze procedure for establishing an awareness of mood or setting is relatively simple. Show students a passage which has a pronounced mood or setting from which key words have been deleted.[4] Then ask students to supply the missing words.

THEY MURDERED HIM.

As we turned to take the __1__, a __2__ burst against the __3__ of his __4__ and a __5__ __6__ shattered his __7__. Engulfed by __8__, he pitched toward the __9__. His __10__ encountered __11__, and he spat frantically, afraid that some of his __12__ had been knocked out. Rising to his __13__, he saw the __14__ through drifting __15__, but held on until __16__ settled into __17__, like a __18__ focusing, making the __19__ sharp again with __20__.

Once students have completed the list of missing words, ask for their choices as the passage is read aloud--make a list of the choices for each blank. Discuss with the class the difference in effect which the choices might have on the feeling suggested by the passage; then show them the original, pointing out to them that it is not so important that they came up with the exact choices of the author, but that they were consistent in choosing words which created a certain picture or feeling.

THEY MURDERED HIM.

As we turned to take the ball, a dam burst against the side of his head and a hand grenade shattered his stomach. Engulfed by nausea, he pitched toward the grass. His mouth encountered gravel, and he spat frantically, afraid that some of his teeth had been knocked out. Rising to his feet, he saw the field through drifting gauze but held on until everything settled into place, like a lens focusing, making the world sharp again, with edges.

As a further means of suggesting to students that one element of a short story contributes to another, select a passage from a story which focuses on setting as a means of suggesting character traits. The following passage from Virginia Woolf's "The Duchess and the Jeweller" works well for this purpose.

The Duchess and the Jeweller

> Oliver Bacon lived at the top of a house overlooking the Green Park. He had a flat; chairs jutted out at the right angles--chairs covered in hide. Sofas filled the bays of the windows--sofas covered in tapestry. The windows, the three long windows, had the proper allowance of discreet net and figured satin. The mahogany sideboard bulged discreetly with the right brandies, whiskeys, and liqueurs. And from the middle window he looked down upon the glossy roofs of fashionable cars packed in the narrow straits of Piccadilly. A more central position could not be imagined. And at eight in the morning he would have his breakfast brought in on a tray by a man-servant: the man-servant would unfold his crimson dressing-gown; he would rip his letters open with his long pointed nails and would extract thick white cards of invitation upon which the engraving stood up roughly from duchesses, countesses, viscountesses, and Honourable Ladies. Then he would wash; then he would eat his toast; then he would read his paper by the bright burning fire of electric coals.

Ask students to study such a passage carefully and then try to tell what kind of a person they think might be found in that setting. They must produce specific evidence from the passage to support their analysis. Frequent practice in this kind of close reading, with class discussion and sharing of ideas following, usually helps students become much more perceptive in their reading and increases their sensitivity to word choice and detail as well as to the connections that a writer builds between the different elements of a short story.

Characterization

Of all the elements in fiction, students seem to respond best to discussions of character. Too often, however, their discussions center only on the most obvious aspects, and a desire to stereotype frequently surfaces. This hastiness to label causes students to miss more subtle details and often encourages them to read superficially.

One way to demonstrate the limitations of stereotyping and make students aware of the need for collecting as much evidence as possible before forming any judgments or generalizations is to place them in a situation where evidence is very limited. To do this, select approximately ten close-up pictures of people, some relatively well-known, others quite obscure. Magazines, newspapers, and brochures offer ample material. With each picture be certain to select a statement made by the individual in the picture. "Crop" each picture if necessary so no tell-tale signs of location or occupation appear. List the statements made by the people on a separate sheet of paper and give a copy to each student. Then hang the pictures around the room or place them on the chalk tray so that students can view them easily. Ask students to study the pictures carefully, getting out of their seats (in small groups) to examine the pictures if necessary, and match each picture to a statement; urge students to jot notes to themselves as to the reasons for their choices.

After everyone has had an opportunity to match pictures and statements, conduct a poll to find out which statements were matched with which pictures; discuss the reasons for the matching. If the pictures and statements have been selected carefully, fruitful discussion about stereotypes will emerge along with a realization on the part of students that statements made without a clear sense of context may lead us into forming unjustifiable opinions. It is only a step from this kind of an exercise into a discussion of how readers arrive at an understanding of a character in fiction, using the same methods that we do when we size people up in real life.

Students also can gain experience in becoming more discriminating readers of character if they have frequent opportunities to look at samples of characterization from a variety of sources. To determine how well students are doing in developing their sensitivity to different ways of presenting character, offer them short excerpts of characterization from sources where the quality of the writing tends to range from weak to strong. Asking students to examine such passages and

then rank them from best to worst will provide considerable insight for the teacher as to how far students have advanced in their literary tastes. Discussions of the rankings also will provide information that the teacher can use in later activities and selection of reading material. Here are three such samples.[6]

Characterization

1. A big bald-headed man with a boil on his chin and a boy in a short-sleeved sweatshirt were sitting on a bench in front of the station. The man was cleaning his fingernails with a leather punch blade of a Boy Scout knife. It seemed an odd kind of knife for a grown man to have, but you never know with these rednecks. I've never understood them and I never will. They're like a different race. And, of course, he didn't even look up until I slammed the car door. He wiped the blade on his overalls and closed the knife and handed it to the boy. So, that, at least, explained that. Then he got up and sauntered across the driveway toward me. He stopped with his hand on the high-test pump, and he had that closed-up look they get. You'd think he'd never seen a Thunderbird before.

2. For almost thirty years, Billy Hendricks kept all these blue-brown smiles and their few souls at peace most of the time. During his years as sheriff of Lawrence County, Billy never killed a man with his nickel-plated Colt .45, or even fired it in the line of duty. Its huge presence in his belt just naturally encouraged respect for law and order. On those rare occasions when he drew it, he only parted the hair of his adversary with its long barrel. A number of respectable Merrillsburg merchants and deacons carry small scars near their temples, prize them as badges of lurid youth, and embroider tales for their sons about the night when Billy taught them how things ought to be.

   Even more awesome than Billy's Colt was his voice. One shout, it was said, would nip a fight in the bud, curdle milk and addle the brains of babies. It was a raw rasp, a gritty bark that even in what was supposed to be quiet conversation made the flesh along the listener's backbone quiver.

3. People like Drew circulate via the tiny, remote veins, never the arteries. I was getting used to seeing her always in the shadows, or on the edge of her chair, or in the little markets on some pot-holed street that most people ignore. I expected her to find the strange little pediatrician she found, the one who agreed with her that if Nathaniel did not feel like eating for a couple of days, he certainly wasn't going to die because of it. Drew had reasons for everything she did. But most people did not perceive them. The one thing Drew did not have was the compulsion to find a reason to justify how she was.

Assessing Student Growth

Although testing is a definite part of our educational system, we often destroy students' interest and involvement in literature by insisting on tests

which measure only objective knowledge, the memorization of facts, dates, and names. Such tests, of course, have their purpose, but too often we tend to overlook other ways of gaining insight into how our students are progressing in their levels of response to reading and in their willingness to become involved with the literature they read.

Creative teachers have long known that perhaps the best test of all is one where the student brings together all the skills and understanding developed during a unit of study and applies them to resolving a particular problem. These problem-solving "tests" need not be graded in the conventional sense; in fact, often no grade should be established at all. Instead, teacher and students should share in the solutions, discussing them, analyzing them, and using the experience as a stepping-stone toward even more exploration of the world of literature. Several such approaches for the short story are suggested below.

Improvisation. If students have had some experience with improvising dramatic responses to their reading, teachers easily can develop "starter" packages which will provide students with ample challenge and opportunity to demonstrate their grasp of different elements in short fiction. These same improvisational starters also can be used as pre-reading activities. Here is a sampling based on some well-known short stories.

Starters

1. You are visiting a friend for a month. Your friend is very popular with the opposite sex, but you don't seem to have much luck. You overhear your friend telling a group of people that you are attractive but dull. Confront the friend with this statement and demand an explanation. ("Bernice Bobs Her Hair"-Fitzgerald)

2. An alert has been sounded to evacuate all people within a 20 mile radius of Lincoln Dam, which has begun to leak; a destructive flood could occur at any moment. A young Red Cross worker has been instructed to see that all the people on a certain street leave. The worker is successful in getting the people to leave except for one very old person who comes as far as the edge of the sidewalk but refuses to go any further.

Improvise a scene between the Red Cross worker and the old person in which the focus is upon discovering why the old person refuses to leave; play to some resolution. ("Old Man at the Bridge," Hemingway)

3. The following advertisement appeared once in a large daily newspaper:

> A man with a few months to live would like nice people to adopt his little girl, six, blue eyes, curls. References. Call 881-4220.

Improvise one or more situations which show what might have happened as a result of this ad. ("Bill," Zona Gale)

Visuals. If one of the aims of a short story unit is to determine how well students have grasped different elements of the short story, the following activity works well as a collaborative effort. Two collections of pictures are placed on display in the classroom; one set of pictures emphasizes people, the other set offers settings but no people. Students work with a partner and select at least two pictures from the "person" pile and one or more pictures from the "scene" pile. Then they are to follow these instructions.

1. Using all or some of your choices, do the following:

A. Person

Examine the pictures of people you have selected; working with your partner, prepare a list of what you consider to be the KEY physical traits of the individuals in the pictures; be as concrete as possible; for example, don't just say old, but select some specific detail in the picture which tells you the person is old.

List what you consider to be the apparent personality traits of each person.

List what you think might be each person's possible occupation.

B. Scene

Examine the pictures of the scenes you have selected; working with your partner, list what you consider to be the key features of your scene; include such things as time and even mood or general atmosphere; be specific again.

C. Action

Indicate the situation in which you envision these characters meeting or being together; identify what their major problem is; that is, what conflict is occurring which they have to face; outline briefly the key steps that they follow in try-

ing to resolve the conflict.

D. Statement
If you were to write a story using the material indicated above, what would be the central idea of the story or the "point" of the story?

The results should be discussed orally--most students enjoy sharing their ideas in this situation--and then the written information may be turned in to the teacher who can examine the results for signs of the students' understanding of how various elements work together to create a potential work of fiction.

Writing. Written response is not new in the study of literature, but much of the emphasis has fallen on the student's ability to analyze critically what has been read. This undue emphasis upon critical response often short circuits the reading process for many young people; they become so concerned with labeling and analyzing that any enjoyment they might have had in the initial reading of a story quickly disappears, lost to both them and the teacher. Students need to realize that writing is a valuable extension of their feelings about a work; for this reason, students should be encouraged to explore their feelings about their reading in as many ways as possible: Reading journals, reading logs, and personal response essays.

At first such writing activity will seem foreign to many students and they will be stiff in their written response. Gradually, though, if teachers respond not so much to the critical nature of the writing but to the clarity of the students' personal responses to their reading, the opportunity to respond in this way will become an interesting and meaningful one for students. And from such personal written responses, the teacher, once again, will gain valuable insights as to how students are relating the literature they read to their own lives. Consider the following example.[7]

I imagine the story "The Waltz" by Dorothy Parker presents a view which many girls find quite amusing. As a guy, though, it has only substantiated for me what I have always thought my dancing partner has been thinking every time I have attempted to dance slow.

Probably forever, after reading this story, I am going to wonder if the "Yes, I'd love to" responses I get to my invitations are really genuine. Even the girls I've danced with that seemed to have a good time may only have been acting a part that women seem to handle with ease. For example, the girl I took to my junior prom and who said she had a good time may have been in a living hell the whole night.

One area, though, that I always had thought I handled adequately was the small talk involved during a dance. The problem now is that some of the responses made in this story sound very similar to some of the responses made by my dancing partners when I said something witty.

Dorothy Parker doesn't offer me any help in this dilemma. If she could have offered some hint as to how to know when your partner is suffering, I would feel more comfortable. At least then a person could leave before psychologically scarring the other person for life. Perhaps the reason she has offered no hints is that a woman cannot even understand the ways of other women. If this is so, then perhaps all women are individuals and some day I may even find one that doesn't mind or even notice if I wear a terrible-looking outfit, step on a toe, kick her in the shin, or make a stupid remark. Let's hope so.

One of the major reasons that students fail to become enthusiastic about the reading which they do in classrooms is that they have so little opportunity to discover literature on their own. The traditional short story lesson, for example, is a lesson in textual explication, usually done more by the teacher than the student. Discussions of short story texts should occur, of course, and students need to understand some things about the genre. But this does not mean that activities leading to such understanding have to be routine or repetitive. None of the activities that has been suggested will, by itself, guarantee that students will become expert readers of short fiction. What they will do, however, is involve students more directly in their reading and give them far more opportunities to explore their own responses to what they read. If we hope to increase student involvement in the reading of literature, then we will need to be sure that what we

ask students to do puts this personal response as readers first and that our discussions of text and authors never lose sight of the fact that it is the reader's own relationship with the literature which determines whether or not he or she becomes an avid reader.

Notes

[1]June B. Evans, "A Theme Is Not a Plot," Exercise Exchange (Spring 1981), 38-39.

[2]Originally devised by Sara Roody, Nyack High School, Nyack, New York, this exercise appears in Teaching Language and Literature, 2nd ed. by Walter Loban, Margaret Ryan, and James R. Squire (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1969), 562; see also Dwight L. Burton, Literature Study in the High School, 3rd ed. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969), 87-98; and Raymond J. Rodrigues and Dennis Badaczewski, A Guidebook for Teaching Literature (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1978), 70.

[3]From The Complete Short Stories of D.H. Lawrence, vol. 2 (New York: Viking Press, Inc., 1961). Exercise adapted from A Guide Book for Teaching Literature, p. 58.

[4]From Robert Cormier, The Chocolate War (Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1974), 7.

[5]From A Haunted House and Other Stories by Virginia Woolf (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1944).

[6]From Teaching Literature Today by Charles R. Duke (Portland, Maine: J. Weston Walch, Publisher, 1979), 105. See this text for additional activities to increase students' involvement with literature.

[7]Ibid., p. 50.